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The Ambivalence of American Womanhood: An Examination of Sport and Advertising in the Ladies Home Journal during the 1920s

In the 1920s many middle-class American women must have felt that great strides had been made in the recognition of their rights and throughout the decade they ventured into uncharted and previously taboo territories, including that bastion of masculinity, sport. As part of popular culture, women's magazines served to mediate the tensions that these kinds of changes generated for their readers. One example was the *Ladies Home Journal (LHJ)*, a publication popular with white, middle-class women.

From its inception, the *LHJ's* editorial staff guided and educated their readers in the ways of a rapidly changing world through the magazine's advice columns. These covered topics such as patent medicine, etiquette, and household budgets, among others. The magazine established itself as a distributor of opinions and expertise over the years. Exploiting this status, another section of the magazine, the advertisements, often mimicked the advice column formula and thus promoted a lifestyle as well as their wares.

Advertisers and their advertisements explored and exploited opportunities that arose from the social tensions of the decade. They could not ignore the traditional notions of womanhood or the demands these placed on women, but at times these contradicted new ideas about social and personal freedom. These conflicts also played out in sport. Assumptions about women's inferior physical make-up and their domestic responsibilities limited the types of and opportunities for their sport, but promoters argued that the latter was essential to the physical well-being of the 20th century homemaker. The *LHJ* attempted to mediate between these contradictory pressures and help its readers resolve the difficult question to which those pressures gave rise: What should a woman do?

Consumer culture played an important role in the ambivalence emerging from these tensions. Unlike advice columns, advertisements passed on their ideology in a seemingly less proselytizing way. They were the purveyors, inculcators, and reflectors of middle-class values, attitudes, and mores and advocated a consumption ethic as a solution to the tensions of living in a modern world. They thus served as a therapy that was linked to capitalist, corporate hegemony. In times of uncertainty they gave a feeling of empowerment that eased anxiety even as the solutions they provided were superficial and empty. And in the end they could not deliver what they promised.

This paper examines advertisements with a sport motif in the *LHJ* in the 1920s. In doing so, it attempts to understand the messages in these advertisements and how sports were supposed to fit into the lives of middle-class women. Advertisements involving

sports implied that physical activities were a means for creating an ideal woman. She should be active but not aggressive, should maintain a youthful appearance even as her body aged, and be physically fit but also graceful and dainty. As ideals unattainable in nature, these only perpetuated the tensions that existed between reality and ideal for women. In promoting their products as solutions to these tensions, advertisers turned consumption into a never-ending enterprise in the pursuit of the ideal type. Thus, they furthered and strengthened capitalist corporate hegemony.



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